Tips for Encouraging Open Discussions about DIGITAL LIVES

The online world is an entirely familiar and commonplace part of life for today’s children and young people, far more so than for previous generations. There are many positives to children being able to access online materials, so it’s important not to demonise the internet, games and apps, and limit the exploration of their positive aspects. At the same time, we do have a responsibility to educate children about the hazards they may encounter online (just as we would about real-world dangers) so it’s essential that we don’t shy away from talking to them about the complex—and often sensitive—subject of what they do and what they see when they’re online.

Here are some suggestions for kicking off conversations with your child about their digital life…

MAKE YOUR INTEREST CLEAR

Showing enthusiasm when you breach the subject signals to your child that you’ve keen to learn about the positives of their online world. Most children enjoy educating adults and will happily chat about what they use the internet for or what games and apps they’re into and how they work. Talking about your favourite games and apps in action could help you spot any aspects that may need your attention—such as chat functions which might require a settings adjustment to limit contact with strangers. Keep listening even if your child pauses for a long time; they could be considering how to phrase something specific, or they may be gauging your reaction.

BE OPEN AND HONEST. APPROPRIATE TO THEIR AGE

At various stages, children and young people become curious about puberty and how their bodies change, about relationships; about how babies are made and about sexual health. If your child knows that they can discuss these sensitive subjects with you, they tend to be less likely to go looking online for answers—which can often provide them with inaccurate or harmful content. In some cases, lead them to consuming harmful content. Don’t worry if you don’t immediately know the answers to their questions—just find out for yourself and go back to them once you have the facts.

REMINDE YOUR CHILD THEY CAN ALWAYS TALK TO YOU

In my role I work with many children and young people who are too reluctant to tell a trusted adult about harmful content they’ve viewed online. In case it leads to having their devices confiscated. Emphasise to your child that you’re always there to listen and help; reassure them that if they do view harmful content, then it’s not their fault—just by talking about it openly will help. Children shouldn’t be expected to be resilient against abuse or feel that it’s their job to prevent it.

KEEP TALKING!

The most valuable advice we can give is to keep talking with your child about their digital lives. You could try using everyday situations to ask questions about their online experiences.

DISCUSS THAT NOT EVERYTHING WE SEE ONLINE IS REAL

Here, you could give examples from your own digital life of the online world versus reality—for example, those Instagram posts which show the perfect house: spotlessly clean, never messy and immaculately decorated. Explain to your child that there are many other aspects of the online world which are deliberately presented in an unrealistic way for effect—such as social media, relationship, their body, having perfect skin and so on.

TRY TO REMAIN CALM

As much as possible, try to stay calm even if your child tells you about an online experience that makes you feel angry or scared. Our immediate emotions frequently influence the way we react, so it’s possible that your initial reaction as a parent or carer could deter a child from speaking openly about what they’ve seen. Give yourself time to consider the right approach, and perhaps speak with other family members or school staff while you are considering your next steps.

CREATE A FAMILY AGREEMENT

Involving your whole household in coming up with a family agreement about device use can be immensely beneficial. You could discuss when (and for how long) it’s OK to use phones, tablets, consoles and so on at home; what parental controls are for and why they’re important; and why it’s good to talk to each other about things we’ve seen or experienced online (both good and bad). Explaining your reasoning will help children to understand that, as trusted adults, we want to make sure they are well informed and kept safe. Allowing children to have their say when coming up with your family agreement also makes them more likely to stick to it in the long term.

Meet Our Expert

Rebecca receives of SABF (Safeguarding Awareness in Education) has almost 20 years’ experience advising schools on child protection and online safety, and her work includes both domestic schools and colleges. She is also a qualified teacher and a published author on the subject, she also advises the Department of Education on the staff training element of the BSE standard.